

## Proserpina's Tapestry in Claudian's *De raptu*: Tradition and Design

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### Pictures of Different Worlds

Clearly, there are links between the description of the tapestry and Proserpina's life, starting, as it does, with her father's house, and ending with her husband's. These two homes are, at the same time, different realms of the universe. Her tapestry gives an outline of the cosmos, and shows the order in which its elements are arranged. Within this order, earth takes pride of place, and rightly so since the tapestry is dedicated to Ceres, whose love for the earth sometimes borders on identification with it (cf. 3. 71 f. with 2. 171 f., and 2. 203).

It is especially appropriate that Claudian, in his first book, draws this picture of the universe, since, from the very beginning of the main action, the order of the world is at stake, Pluto threatening to undo it (1. 115 f.).

As a new stage of Claudian's representation of the world, the general outline given on Proserpina's fabric will be enlivened in Book II by a more dynamic approach: on Proserpina's dress is to be seen the birth of sun and moon, and her walk through the meadows has the reader witness the birth as well as the death of flowers. Thus, in completion of the static image on the tapestry, in Book II the dimension of time and change is introduced, which is essential to the life of nature and man on earth.

The plucking of flowers, which is constantly related to the deaths of mythic youths, foreshadows the rape of Proserpina. The young goddess, who "loses the light of heaven," changes from Jupiter's world (the macrocosm) to Pluto's realm which, in his speech, and in the last part of Book II, is described as a microcosm of its own. Significantly, the unchanging flowers of Elysium will be opposed to those of Henna (2. 289), which are subject to the law of birth and death.

With Book III, a new chapter is opened: Ceres' wanderings over the earth which will finally result in her giving agriculture to mankind. From heaven and underworld, the scenery is now narrowed down to earth; Jupiter's speech sets a new perspective: the historical development of civilization. This second cycle of the work exhibits striking parallels to the first: Pluto's initial rebellion (1. 32 ff.) is matched by Ceres' sacrilegious violation of the

sacred grove (3. 332 ff.). Pluto, in Book I, had threatened to release the Titans (1. 66; cf. 1. 114). Mount Aetna, which had been thrown on to a giant, serves Ceres to kindle her torches. While Books I and II show Pluto changing from fury and anger to mildness and serenity, in Book III Ceres is furious to become calm only at the ending which, though lost, is known to us from the outlines given in Books I and III (1. 30 *unde datae populis fruges* together with Ceres' change from sorrow to joy, and 3. 50 f. *luctu . . . laetata*). The "world" of Book III is "our" earth seen as the stage of suffering, history, and civilization.

From this overview we see that the description of Proserpina's tapestry, far from being an otiose embellishment, is tightly interwoven with her own life and that of the dedicatee;<sup>1</sup> moreover, it reflects one of the author's main interests: to give a series of pictures of the universe in different aspects; of this chain, it is the first and basic link.

### Society: structure of scenes

Having shown that the poem might be called "cosmic poetry" in different aspects—physical, vegetal, cultural—let us now turn to the social sphere. In Claudian's Olympus, a strictly hierarchical order reigns; there is no room for spontaneous activity; everything, down to the playful plucking of flowers, has to be ordered from above. The supreme monarch, without any discussion, can impose sufferings on others; he can compel even the entire community of the gods to lie, and turn away from a clearly innocent person. Since everything has been ordained by the Parcae, or by Jupiter, who loves to quote them, discussion and even dialogue become almost impossible. These social conditions are reflected in the structure of scenes, which, quite consequently, break off after the authority has spoken.

### Speeches (Excursus)

Consequently, instead of dialogue, we get speeches which, at their best, reflect the speaker's mind, or, at their worst, are proclamations. To both types of speech, usually an answer is superfluous.

Of neither type of speech is persuasion the immediate goal: Jupiter need not persuade anybody since he will be obeyed no matter how he speaks. Ceres cannot persuade anybody since she will not be obeyed no matter how she speaks. The function of the first type of speech, therefore, will be to convey some ideas, not so much to the interlocutor as to the reader; the second type of speech will portray the character and her emotions. Ceres' speeches in some ways prefigure what much later will be called the "inward monologue."

<sup>1</sup> Arachne's tapestry had reflected her heretical view of the gods, without immediate reference to her own life (her punishment is foreshadowed on Minerva's fabric): *Ov. Met.* 6. 70–128.

## Similes

## 1. Connection with the larger context

Our scene is framed by two important similes. In the introduction, Venus' path shines like a comet foreboding disaster.<sup>2</sup> The simile makes the reader aware of the fatal purpose of Venus' seemingly playful mission, thus putting the scene into a larger context.

The weaving scene ends with the appearance of the goddesses and with Proserpina blushing like ivory stained with purple. This simile, which is transferred from Virgil's Lavinia<sup>3</sup> to Proserpina, indirectly shows her to be a bride, as is confirmed by 2. 325, where *sollicitum pudorem* refers to the bride's blushes. In his story of the weaver Arachne, Ovid had mentioned the maiden's blushing, but with a different meaning: the blush is rather a sign of pride, and the details of the simile are different (*Met.* 6. 46 f.). The fact that Claudian knew the Arachne story is confirmed last but not least by the introduction of a spider which will try to complete the abandoned tapestry (3. 158). The place of the blush within the story is analogous to Ovid, but the details and the meaning of the simile are closer to Virgil: thus, Claudian shows us that he will rectify Ovid's heretical approach. His "carpet of Proserpina" in a sense is a palinode of Arachne's tapestry: while in Ovid we have two competing views on world, society, and art, in Claudian there is only one. On the other hand, Claudian is able to change Ovid also the reverse way, as we will see from his treatment of the Erysichthon legend.

The use of similes—which cannot be separated from the reference to certain predecessors—shows the primordial importance of similes and of their meanings in their traditional contexts to create for the reader a framework of reference into which to put a given scene, and to make him aware of the way it is related to the larger context. References to older poets are relevant here, since they help to give the reader some signal as to the meaning.

The similes discussed hitherto were used by Claudian in functions or contexts roughly analogous to those of his predecessors, and the very parallels were meant to be helpful to the reader.

The rainbow simile, however, which is very prominent in Ovid's Arachne story (*Met.* 6. 63 ff.), is displaced by Claudian. Ovid had shown Pallas and Arachne both weaving and using an entire palette of shades so similar that they are hard to distinguish: as in a rainbow there are a thousand different colors, but the eye cannot detect the change from each one to the next; adjacent colors are very close but the extremes are plainly different.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Aen.* 10. 272, Aeneas' shield as seen by the Rutulians.

<sup>3</sup> *Aen.* 12. 67 ff.; Statius *Ach.* 1. 308.

While Ovid had introduced this simile during the process of weaving, in Claudian it appears in a different scene: together with a peacock simile, it crowns the creation of flowers by Zephyrus (2. 97-100). This simile is not the only element which connects the second book with the tapestry in Book I, thus showing that the description of the world is continued on a new scale. There is also the description of Proserpina's garment in Book II which, showing the birth of sun and moon, introduces the principle of time and change relevant to this section.

## 2. Interchange of Spheres

Let us now illustrate, in an excursus, a more sophisticated relationship between the main narrative and a simile, a relationship shedding light on the structure of the poem as a whole.

In Book III, which evidently starts a new main section of his epic (very probably what was meant to be the second half), Claudian compares Ceres to Megaera, now using for a simile what had been part of the main action in Books I and II. There, the Furies were roused by Pluto (1. 38 ff.),<sup>4</sup> and at the marriage banquet they mixed the wine, and their snakes dangling into it partook, and were soothed with a gentle song; then the Furies kindled the wedding torches. This last description is part of the "reverse world" sketched by Claudian at the end of Book II. The relaxing of the Furies is the opposite extreme to the situation at the beginning, when they had been stirring up a revolution. Tisiphone's ominous torch of war (1. 40) is replaced by the unwonted wedding torches (2. 347). What had been the sphere of action in the first half of the work becomes the sphere of image in the second half: Ceres setting out to light her torches from Aetna is likened to Megaera who kindles her torches from the Phlegethon to punish Thebes or Mycenae. By her grief, the goddess' character has been transmogrified: she is now an infernal monster. The technique of interchanging the spheres of action and of image had been used by Virgil: the real sea storm of Book I is matched by an entire series of wind and water images in Book VII of the *Aeneid*.<sup>5</sup> In Book I Juno, through the forces of nature, had attacked the Trojans; in Book VII she changes her tactic and sows madness in human hearts through Allecto. Claudian clearly understood this pattern and adopted it. While in Book I Pluto and the Furies try to attack Olympus from the outside, in Book III, it is the goddess Ceres herself, possessed by grief, who becomes like a Fury.

<sup>4</sup> Pallas thinks that they induced Pluto to rape Proserpina (2. 216).

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the real fire of Troy in Book II is reflected in the numerous light and fire similes of Book VIII.

## Imitation

Let us now compare Claudian to his predecessors, and ask what use he makes of them.

## 1. Virgil

For a work involving the underworld, the first model to be thought of is the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*. Claudian who, for an epic poet, lays unusual stress on inspiration, assumes the role of Virgil's Sibyl who is possessed by Phoebus (*Rapt.* 1. 6; *Aen.* 6. 77); like her he urges the uninitiated to leave (1. 4; *Aen.* 6. 258); Proserpina even had been mentioned in the same Virgilian context (*Aen.* 6. 251). Besides the role of the Sibyl, Claudian also takes the role of Virgil, invoking the gods of the underworld, as his great predecessor had done (1. 20; *Aen.* 6. 264). The new stress laid on the poet's identity with the inspired Sibyl reveals Claudian's intention to uncover the mysteries of the world. Correspondingly, the *sedes beatae* (*Aen.* 6. 39) take an important place in the *De Raptu*. This is especially clear in Pluto's speech to Proserpina which, for obvious reasons, starts with that blissful site, quoting, almost literally, the lines devoted to the special sun and stars belonging to those places (2. 285 f.; *Aen.* 6. 640 f.). The meadows mentioned by Pluto (2. 287 f.), remind us of *Aeneid* 6. 638; 642; 679; 684; the flowers (2. 289), however, seem to be a hybrid of the bee simile in *Aeneid* 6. 708 and the flowers of the Golden Age, Ovid *Met.* 1. 108. The tree bearing gold is mentioned as Proserpina's property in *Aen.* 6. 139 ff., and in Claudian 2. 290 ff. The idea of Proserpina judging the dead seems to be influenced by Ovid's Orpheus story, where she decides to release Eurydice.

No less important is the relationship of Ceres' dream of Proserpina (3. 80 ff.) to Aeneas' dream of Hector (*Aen.* 2. 268 ff.): Proserpina, once beautiful and happy, now looks wretched and mournful—as had Hector in Aeneas' dream. In both cases, though for different reasons, the apparition exhorts the dreamer to leave Troy.

Book IV of the *Aeneid* is used to characterize both Proserpina and Ceres. Proserpina's reproaches to Ceres strike notes similar to those of Dido to Aeneas (consider the mention of the tigress, 3. 105, *Aen.* 4. 367); Ceres, in her grief, metaphorically becomes a Maenad (*bacchatur* 3. 269), as Dido had done (*Aen.* 4. 301).

In many cases the relationship of Claudian's figures to Virgil's exhibits analogy of type, and can be called "typological." In the inferno scene, however, there is deliberate contrast. The idea of introducing a blissful break by stopping the machinery of punishment for some happy moments had been anticipated by Virgil in the *Georgics*, and by Ovid, to whom we now turn.

2. The *Georgics* and Ovid

When Orpheus descended to the underworld, he changed it by his song: in the *Georgics* (4. 481 ff.) we read: "The very halls of Death were spell-bound, and inmost Tartarus, and the Furies with livid snakes entwined in their locks. Cerberus held agape his triple mouths, and Ixion's wheel was stayed by the still wind" (transl. H. R. Fairclough, Loeb).

And in the *Metamorphoses*: "As he spoke thus, striking the chords in accompaniment to his words, the bloodless spirits wept; Tantalus did not grasp at the fleeing wave; Ixion's wheel stopped in wonder; the vultures did not pluck at the liver; the Danaids rested from their urns, and you, Sisyphus, sat upon your stone. Then first, tradition says, conquered by the song, the cheeks of the Eumenides were wet with tears; nor could the queen, nor he who rules the lower world refuse the suppliant." (*Met.* 10. 40-47). By Orpheus' song, the laws of the underworld are changed; the sinners can rest from their punishments, and Pluto himself becomes mild. These ideas are expanded by Claudian throughout his underworld scene.

The passage from the *Georgics* is also echoed in the silence preceding Pluto's speech (1. 84 ff.), where it is combined with the epic tradition of the silence preceding the words of Jupiter (c. g. *Aen.* 10. 101 ff.). Yet there is clear evidence of Ovidian influence, too: in Ovid, the cause of Pluto's mildness had been Orpheus' reminding the regal pair that it was love which had joined them (10. 29). In Claudian too, the change in Pluto's character is effected by love. It was the later poet's idea to expand the short-lived effect of Orpheus' song into a rather long festival, on the occasion of Pluto's marriage to Proserpina, thus almost turning hell into paradise. He might have felt entitled to do so, all the more since Ovid's Orpheus had evoked the rape of Proserpina in the same context. Claudian enjoyed recreating the great primeval event of which Orpheus' momentary success was but a faint reflection. From the same scene, in which Proserpina is the first to be asked and the first to be moved, Claudian deduces Pluto's chivalrous idea to let his queen judge the dead (2. 302-04).<sup>6</sup> Orpheus' speech (*Met.* 10. 17; 32-35), with its unconditional recognition of the universal power of death (and, therefore, of Pluto) is interestingly revived in the speech directed by Lachesis to Pluto (1. 55-62). This speech soothes Pluto for the first time and in doing so prefigures his later change. A second reminiscence of the same passage from Ovid turns up in Pluto's speech to Proserpina (2. 294-304), where it is meant to console her by pointing out the extent of her future power. Ovid's Orpheus scene seems to be behind much of the invention of the *De Raptu*. The change of the underworld effected by Claudian makes him a rival to Orpheus, and, in fact, throughout the elegiac preface to Book II, Claudian likens himself to the mythical bard.

<sup>6</sup> A gesture quite in accord with the teachings of the *Art of Love*, to let one's mistress feel important as a benefactress (*Ars* 2. 287-94).

In addition, there are meaningful references to the Golden Age (*Met.* 1. 89 ff.) whose people, according to Claudian, dwell in Elysium (2. 285 ff.). The everlasting flowers (2. 289), and their "better zephyrs" are strongly reminiscent of Ovid (*Met.* 1. 107 f.); but Claudian adapts the motif to his main idea of opposing two worlds: we remember how he contrasted the everlasting flowers of Pluto's realm to the ephemeral flowers of Henna (2. 289).

While this development of Ovidian motifs, though powerful and original, does not contradict the predecessor's intentions, Claudian's variation of the Erysichthon theme puts him into radical opposition to Ovid and Callimachus (*Rapt.* 3. 332 ff.; Callim. *Hymn VI*; Ovid, *Met.* 8. 738 ff.). Claudian has Ceres commit the very sin for which she had severely punished her worst enemy Erysichthon. This daring reversal of what had been the central and most edifying tale of the Ceres hymn is, at the same time, highly pathetic and deeply ironical. By alienating a motif which traditionally had served to enhance Ceres' majesty, the poet, with the utmost clarity, reveals the goddess' metamorphosis: her grief has made her completely unlike herself. In this case the imitation by contrast conveys a meaning which is essential to both content and structure of the poem.

### 3. Statius

Let us now turn to Statius. The introduction of Proserpina in her nubile maidenhood is strongly reminiscent of the way Statius had presented Deidamia to his readers. The parallel is all the more revealing since, later on, Claudian, unlike Statius, will stress innocence rather than the bloom of youth. The three goddesses to which Statius had likened Deidamia are really present in Claudian.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he cannot resist the temptation to use them also for a simile. To make the comparison more believable, Statius imagines Minerva without her armour, whereas Claudian imagines the young girl with the accoutrements of the goddesses, as Ovid had done (*Met.* 1. 695 ff.). Tellingly, he omits Venus from the comparison as being incongruous with Proserpina's virginity, while, in Statius, the daring comparison to Venus is excused by the fact that the entire scene is viewed through the eyes of the young lover. If in Statius there is still room for personal feeling, in Claudian everything is arranged by the authorities, and Pluto has not even seen the girl he will have to rape and marry.

Even more important is the change of character produced by love. By love Pluto has become *mitior* (307); the verb *mollescere* (313) is suggestive of Statius' *Achilleid* (1. 272 *mitescere*; 326 *mollit*), where the wild Achilles is changed by love, even to the point of putting on women's

<sup>7</sup> The idea of two virginal deities assisting Venus in preparing a rape is, to say the least, surprising: later we are told that the honorable company of Pallas and Diana helped to disguise Venus' wiles.

clothes. The interchange of specific characteristics of gender brought on by love<sup>8</sup> produces a shift in Pluto's temper, thus reestablishing cosmic harmony. The idea of a metamorphosis brought on by love is common to both Claudian and Statius. Yet, the later poet uses reminiscences from Statius to achieve his own different goals.

#### Claudian's new approach

Claudian's picture of the world and society reflects the hierarchical structure of the late Roman Empire; the absence of discussion and often even of dialogue is a consequence of this situation; the same is true of his turning scenes almost into isolated pictures. There is no competition of different world views, as there had been in Ovid, but there is the idea of unfolding the world in different aspects successively.

Much of Claudian's art in his description of different "worlds" is explained by his looking at things from an unusual point of view. He even defamiliarizes them to the point of making them appear completely new to the reader. Such is the case with the underworld, which, first seen with Pluto's loving eyes, looks almost like a paradise, and then, on the unusual occasion of Pluto's and Proserpina's wedding, is turned upside down, becoming a rather jolly prison. Even more shocking is the reversal of Ceres' cult legend.

Also in detail, unusual perspectives add to the charm of the narrative: Jupiter is seen with the hate-filled eyes of his younger brother, who comments on his cruelty and polygamy (1. 93 ff.), and with the eyes of his mother, who knows the nature, if not the extent, of his slothfulness (3. 134 f.).

Despite the use of different techniques and the assimilation of many traditions, Claudian's epic has a unity of its own. This is made possible by his basic idea of writing a "cosmic poetry" in different successive aspects, rivalling, among other epic poems, the *Aeneid* and also—considering the theme (agriculture), the planned size (probably four books), and the relationship of the basic idea to Orpheus—the *Georgics*.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf., for instance, pseudo-Apuleius *Asclepius* 21, in a Platonic tradition.